CHAPTER 10

The Role of Suriname in Haitian Migration to French Guiana: Identities on the Move and Border Crossings

Maud Laëthier

1 Introduction

Caribbean societies are defined by a historical heritage marked by the colonial relationship and by slavery, and by the dynamic character of the social and cultural constructions that emerged from these. Yet, today, their designation as ‘creole worlds’ underlines a diversity or a ‘new’ unity.¹ The migratory movements that have affected them for about thirty years have altered their socio-demographic configurations and have contributed to the emergence of new social and political forms. Understanding these migratory dynamics is of the utmost importance for revealing social re-compositions, new forms of political mobilisations, and identity redefinitions.

In this context, Haiti is one of the countries, or even the country, from where emigration is most significant. Haitians are currently among the most numerous migrants in several Caribbean countries and especially in the French Overseas Territories. This is the case in Guadeloupe, St Martin, and in French Guiana where Haitians constitute 30% to 50% of the immigrant population.² Migrants are also present in Martinique and Suriname, both of which function as points of entry to French Guiana.

This chapter deals with the migratory processes from Haiti to French Guiana. Indeed, migration sometimes reveals itself as multiple and/or successive experiences of mobility that integrate, connect and prioritise various places. To investigate migrations is indeed to talk about movements in space, between the places of departure and the places of arrival, but it is also about

¹ In this usage, which is common in the francophone literature, ‘creole world’ refers to notions of ‘hybridity’ and cultural mixing in society (see Jolivet 1982, 1997).
² Guadeloupe and French Guiana are the French Overseas Departments where the presence of migrants is the most significant. Haitians constitute respectively 44% and 30% of the migrant population of these two regions. In St Martin, migrants represent more than 30% of the population, half of which come from Haiti (see INSEE 2006a et b).
grasping the ease or the difficulties of travelling and when relevant, taking into account the places passed through. In this chapter I will consider how the establishment and the functioning of Haitian migration networks to French Guiana reveal the role played by Suriname in circulatory migration. However, to talk about migrations is also to consider the social organisation of a new norm. New forms of socialisation and social transformations are also at the heart of the question. The viewpoint developed here will thus focus on two aspects: the forms of insertion of the new migrants and the corresponding identity constructions.

Our analysis proposes three steps that will lead us from Haiti to Suriname and French Guiana. The first step aims at understanding the logic at the basis of the mobilities from Haiti. The second step will show how these mobilities develop in Suriname through the migrants’ organisational modes. The multiplicity of trajectories, the gradual construction of the paths and their reconstructions will show how Suriname has become a place of transit and also of more or less long-term settlement. Moreover, we shall discover how this country is simultaneously the centre of cross-border mobilities. Thus, the last part of the discussion will position us on the Guianese side of the border. The migrants’ insertion into the economic and social situation of the west of French Guiana shall be enlightened by a discussion of the relationships that have developed between Haitians and members of the major social groups that they encounter in present-day French Guiana. We shall also consider the identity constructions that shape individual and collective memory in the migrant condition.

My aim is to report the facts of mobility and to work out how they link up in the articulation, at different levels, of the Haitian migrant experience. From this double perspective we shall show how multiple networks and territories invested by migration trajectories come to light through an approach that re-interrogates the alternative between settlement and circulation and between

---

3 The data presented here were collected from surveys carried out in 2008 and 2009 in French Guiana and Suriname within the ANR research project: “Circulatory migrations dynamics and cross-borders mobilities between French Guiana, Suriname, Brazil, Guyana and Haiti” (IRD/AIRD). These data complement other data collected in French Guiana and Haiti since 2001. Part of the survey results were presented at the international symposium “Transit migration in Africa. Local and global dynamics, political management and actors’ experiences” held in December 2009 at Nice Sophia Antipolis University, see M. Laëthier (2011b). The terms by which the routes through Paramaribo are experienced are based on this first analysis.